

**SARKIS AND
"WHEN
ATTITUDES
BECOME FORM"**



Sarkis with his work, *Rouleau en Attente* [A Roll Waiting], installation view, *When Attitudes Become Form* (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information), Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, 1969. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

PREFACE

Sarkis and "When Attitudes Become Form" is an oral history project. Taking as its starting point the exhibition entitled *When Attitudes Become Form (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information)*, which was curated by Harald Szeemann and initially held at Kunsthalle Bern between March 22 and April 23, 1969, later at Museum Haus Lange Krefeld (May 9 – June 15, 1969) and the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (August 28 – September 27, 1969), this project features the prominent artistic positions, interactions, differences, and transformations of the period as narrated by Sarkis, one of the participants in the exhibition. The text, which I have compiled after interviews with Sarkis at his studio in Villejuif, Paris on three separate occasions in January 2011 and December 2012,

is accompanied by photographs from the personal archive of the artist.

When Attitudes Become Form (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information) defined the newly emerging trends of the period as unique "attitudes" and brought them together; these would later come to be called Post-Minimalism, Arte Povera, Field Art, and Conceptual Art. In his catalog piece, Szeemann defined the common ground of these attitudes as "the obvious opposition to form; the high degree of personal and emotional engagement; the pronouncement that certain objects are art, although they have not previously been identified as such; the shift of interest away from the result towards the artistic process; the use of mundane materials; the interaction of work and material; Mother Earth as medium, workplace, the desert as concept".¹

Bringing together the movements that shaped the cultural production of the last century,

¹ *When Attitudes Become Form (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information)*, Szeemann, Harald (ed.), Kunsthalle Bern, 1969.



this exhibition has frequently been the subject of academic and curatorial research, but it has never been studied from the perspective of an artist.

Sarkis and "When Attitudes Become Form" makes it possible to take a look at the creation process of the exhibition and its historical period, through Sarkis' eyes, in light of the "living work" concept, an idea that guided the artist's own practice, supported by archival photographs that document this idea. The publication creates a critically and intellectually fertile ground where Sarkis's thought processes of the 1960s can be discovered as part of the relationship between art and the transformed production and exhibition contexts, as well as the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and the international art system.

—Nazlı Gürlek





Bac en Attente [A Water Tank Waiting], 1969, oxidized metal crate filled with water. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.



- *Bac en Attente (le révélateur)* [A Water Tank Waiting (calling image)] (1969-2001) is in the collection of Center of Contemporary Visual Arts (CAPC) in Bordeaux today. You had made this work originally for the London version of the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*² that was to be held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London in 1969. It underwent a series of changes until it became part of the Bordeaux museum's permanent collection in 2001, and it bears the marks of your thinking and creation processes of more than thirty years.

Back in 1969, it was an iron tank 3 meters in length and 40 cm in width. I said, "Put water in it". It becomes incredibly heavy with water in it, so I said, "Put stays on both sides, and then immerse a projector into the water showing an image"... It was the image of a resistor, and you could see the red, burning heat of the resistor in the water.

- You drafted the work and asked the ICA to produce it.

Funding became a problem at the London exhibition. This is what they proposed: either you draft a project and we produce it but cannot invite you over, or we get one or two of your works at Krefeld and invite you here. But the museum at Krefeld did not want to give the two works it had bought, and I did not want to exhibit the other two. So in the end I drafted a new work and let them produce it in London.

- And after the exhibition?

It remained on the balcony in Paris for twenty years, until 1991. Like a rusty ship (!), like a ship excavated at Yenikapı... Until it re-emerged in a museum in Rennes...

² *When Attitudes Become Form (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information)*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, August 28 – September 27, 1969.





Bac en Attente (le révélateur) [A Water Tank Waiting (image calling)], 1969 - 1992, black iron sheet crate on white, installation view, *Une Scène Parisienne: 1968 - 1972* [A View of Paris: 1968 - 1972], La Criée, Rennes, 1991. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

- It re-emerged in La Criée³, standing in the middle of a big white bed sheet on the floor.

I painted a red house in the middle of the ship, and a second house in green on the part of the bed sheet to which the ship corresponded when it was folded. I repeated this on the other side of the ship. I was wrapping it like a corpse.

- When the time for the exhibition came, the bed sheet was unwrapped and the paint was renewed...

... and wrapped again afterwards. That was the only part that remained rust-free, because it was an oil paint.

- After that first time, the wraps were opened again a year later at Utrecht Centraal Museum⁴, and the paint was reapplied; in the meantime, along with the original creation date of 1969, the exhibition dates at La Criée (1991) and at Centraal Museum (1992) were added to the title; this ritual will be repeated every time the work is exhibited.

This creates an effect that is stronger than words or images, because you feel the work is alive, will continue to live, and grow old. There's life there!

- The museum staff will keep it alive from now on, opening the wrap and reapplying the paint; so each time, the difference unavoidably created by the hand of the painter will enter the equation.

³ *Une Scène Parisienne: 1968 - 1972* [A View of Paris: 1968 - 1972], La Criée, Rennes, May 15 - June 30, 1991.

⁴ *Scènes de Nuit, de Jours* [Night Views, Day Views], Centraal Museum, Utrecht, April 10 - June 7, 1992.



Bac en Attente (le révélateur) [A Water Tank Waiting (image calling)], 1969 - 1992, black iron sheet crate on white, installation view, *Scènes de Nuit, de Jours* [Night Views, Day Views], Utrecht Centraal Museum, 1992. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

That is actually the difficulty with my works. Everyone is so used to static works! Everyone wants the work to remain constant so that it can be analyzed. Think of this like a play – you want to comment on it as you watch it, but that would be wrong. You can't listen to a piece of music with such distance, either, because once you put that distance between yourself and the music, you can no longer feel its existence.

- So, when compared to a play or a piece of music, is a work a matter of production or a matter of performance?

These days I'm trying to understand how orchestra conductors perform a piece. [Sergiu] Celibidache is trying to remove the term "performance" and to "give birth" to the music; when you listen, you have to reach the place in which the music is born and experience that birth.

- In that case, how will we overcome the hierarchy imposed by the idea of the stage?

This is not a matter of hierarchy. If you want to be a part of a period narrative and want to

think about that in terms of the work, then you have to come to the place in which it is born and try to experience that birth, because the things we will discuss here will lead us inside art.

- How will we stop all these documentary photographs before us from locking the moment into the past? Will it suffice to take them out of a 40-year old archive and bring them together in this book?

Look over there [Sarkis points to the room on the right side of the office where we sit]. I'm going to Rotterdam on Thursday, and my assistant will come here with my neon maker and mount a brand new neon work in the empty space on that wall you see there. Now I'm preparing the birth place, the stage; I have rearranged the works already on the wall, changing their places. I will not be here on the birthday; I will come after it is born, take its photographs, and then I will take it out.

- Together with the works surrounding it?

I don't know; for now, I'm busy preparing the birth place.

- But the photographs you will take may one day be rendered visible in place of the work itself, as in the *Site* exhibition.⁵ In the archive, hundreds of them will come together, and once they are taken out of the archive they will stand together with different images and objects as part of a totally different configuration. All of this will be possible only if the photograph that documents the work gets to have a life of its own.

That's a great point.

- It's clear that this meaning you have given to photography will always keep it and the archive alive, but I don't think archiving is the only reason why you want to take the work out after you have photographed it in the studio. The way the work exists in the studio, or at home, is also a part of its life and requires attention, doesn't it?

Yes, the photograph of the work will live among thousands of photographs in the archive, just as the work itself lives among ten other works, at first in the studio, because the photograph needs to go through a process of blending. [Jannis]

⁵ Sarkis: *Site*, Istanbul Modern, September 11, 2009 – January 17, 2010.

Kounellis shows one or two photographs of all his works and never takes them himself. I always take my own photographs, because I never like the ones taken by professional photographers – they work like wall painters. For me, a photograph may not be a direct part of a work, but still it is a supporting part.

- Thanks to the fact that your attitude of giving life to your work extends to the photographs depicting your work, the part of the archive we will present in this publication may just make it



Sarkis' studio/storage converted from a garage on Choisy Boulevard, 1969. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

possible to bring the 1960s, which we will discuss here, alive in the present day. There's another thing I'm curious about in relation to this idea of the living work – the degree of control you hand over to the museum staff once you draft the work and allow them to produce it, or reapply the paint for each new exhibition. At the very least, changing technology may require a series of new decisions when the objects or material you used need to be renewed.

Keeping works continually in progress does create such difficulties, that's true, but I think I compensate for them by including everything possible in the work in terms of technology. I performed a work of mine 24 years after it was first exhibited at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf⁶ in 1972, and [Centre] Pompidou bought that performance.

⁶ *Opération Organe*,
Kunsthalle Düsseldorf,
September 15 – October 15,
1972.

⁷ *Magiciens de la Terre*
[Magicians of the Earth],
Centre Georges Pompidou
and Grande Halle, Parc de
la Villette, Paris, May 18
– August 14, 1989.

During the first exhibition I had used one of those cassette players used at the time, but now it is very difficult to find them or even to use them – every 30 minutes the tape ends, and someone has to be there to turn over the cassette. The question here is this: how can you show

this work today? My proposal to Pompidou was this: leave all the machines as they are, make digital copies of the tapes, stick small mp3 players onto the old cassette players using duct tape, and use old speakers to play the sound.

- Using current means to keep the work alive and achieving its continuity by adapting it to the conditions of the day places it in the ever-changing flux of life; it puts the work into contact with the changing economy, technology, and production techniques.

Because everything that appears to be static has a life, it is alive inside and undergoes change.

- The way you give a series of directions or suggestions to the museum staff to keep the work alive, and the questions asked by Lawrence Weiner concerning the relationship of the artist with the work – how close are the two?

25 years ago, in the 1980s, and 4-5 years before he created *Magiciens de la Terre* [Magicians of the Earth]⁷, Jean-Hubert Martin was the director of Kunsthalle Bern. There he opened my exhibition as well as Weiner's, [Marcel] Broodthaers's, and [Ilya]



⁸ Lawrence Weiner, *Works & Reconstructions*, Kunsthalle Bern, August 19 – October 16, 1983.

⁹ *Cratering Piece*, Mill Valley, California, 1960.

¹⁰ Institut des Hautes Études en Arts Plastiques (Directors: Pontus Hulten, Daniel Buren, Serge Fauchereau, Sarkis), Paris, 1983-1995.

Kabakov's. That was Kabakov's first solo exhibition. They selected about 20 or 30 statements for Weiner's exhibition⁸ and asked others to produce it. But if you ask me, if you allow your work to be that opened, the result will be too unrelated to the original. And that's what happened...

- When he was 19 years old, Weiner was opening holes by simultaneously firing explosives

he had placed around an empty field.⁹ Later he came to think that he could make do with only the verbal expression and that there would be no difference between the two in terms of artistic value.

If Weiner's statement is powerful enough, then it should remain as a statement, and producing it in your mind will be enough; that's the real work. One day we invited Weiner to give a talk at the Institute¹⁰ Pontus Hulten, I and the others had founded together. He confessed then that he would never try something like that again. People always say that visuality is not important in conceptual art, but it is.

- Then how does a work turn into talk?

I had invited another artist, Ian Hamilton Finlay, to my exhibition at Kunsthalle Bern.¹¹ I installed all his works because he was agoraphobic. That invitation is an example of what I mean by talking, and it is also similar to the *Attitudes* exhibition where we were all together, helping each other, talking with each other.

- This reminds me of something Gilles Deleuze said – "Language states the possible, but only in preparing it for a realization".¹²

When I first met [Michelangelo] Pistoletto in 1966, he said he did not want to go on working with mirrors, that he wanted to step out of that style that had become his signature. He was contemplating a series of sculptures called *Oggetti in Meno* [Minus Objects]. He wanted his own being to emerge from the relationship between the works. When we met in Paris, he told me about a theater group called the Living

¹¹ *Ma Mémoire est ma Patrie* [My Memory is My Home], Kunsthalle Bern, June 14 – August 18, 1985.

¹² Samuel Beckett, *Quad ve Diğer Televizyon Oyunları* & Gilles Deleuze, *Bitik*, Norgunk, Istanbul, 2010, p. 46.



Theater.¹³ They were involved in a form of actionist theater that was totally outside the bureaucratic structure, staging their plays on the streets and in houses, getting involved with the people, and Pistoletto was taking part in their plays. In fact, he had feelings for one of the members...

Oggetti in Meno stated that in order to reach the level of being a sculpture, the object required reading, that it was one step away from that level. I regard this series as Pistoletto's most important work, and I think the Living Theater had an influence in it.

- In terms of adding a temporal dimension to the sculpture?

These works show their bodies. For theater to be theater, the play has to turn the viewer into the audience. If it can do that, it is a play. Dario Fo's plays always function on that principle – he says that you have to sculpt the person who comes and sits there to watch you.

- So theater is also a form of sculpture, is that right?

Sculpting means getting that person to look at you in a certain way. Such as when you go into the hall where Pistoletto's *Oggetti in Meno* are placed, and ask how these were brought in in the first place, because you realize they wouldn't have fitted through the door.

- Were they constructed inside?

They were constructed inside to get people to ask that question, to make the audience work. The audience come in from the outside, and see the body of a sculpture that was not brought in from the outside. The body of a sculpture that could not have been brought in from the outside! Then the sculpture gets them to ask themselves, where did I come from and how is it that this body can exhibit itself here? Then, when they continue to the second hall, they come across a sculpture very similar to the one they have just seen. As soon as they say, I have seen this before, the work gets them to question their memory. That situation, that approach created a different tie between the work and the audience, and this tie began with the question of the audience. But it was the work that made them ask that question.

¹³ The Living Theatre was founded in 1947 by Judith Malina, Erwin Piscator, and Julian Beck in New York City.



- Until that time, sculptures were always made in studios and brought to the exhibition space in finished form.

They were brought in and placed; in other words, they were displaced. For the first time, *Oggetti in Meno* dispensed with the displacement of sculptures.

- So you are saying the theater taught the visual artist how to form direct contact with the audience?

Right, and my guess is that the way the Living Theater forms direct contact with its audience comes from [Bertolt] Brecht. Brecht's players always emphasize the fact that they are performing a play on the stage. One way to do that is to act by looking at the audience. This dialectical issue of the theater can be found in most of the works of the 1960s.

- In the collages you made during those years when you came to know Pisoletto, newspaper clippings of photographs showing soldiers in uniforms and people in shabby clothes are placed one after the other as in a film reel and colored with gouache. In the second half of the 1960s when you were creating these works, the Algerian

War of Independence had just ended and the war in Vietnam was still going on. I see that the subject matter carries a criticism of war; what was the formal relationship of the works with the period in which they were produced?

I think those collages tried to reproduce and accelerate a visual event; they seem to be describing a moment of explosion. I was very confident of the content of these works. But somehow the audience was interested not in the content but the visuality of them. They were exhibited once at the Paris Biennial in 1967, and given the first prize for paintings. I don't know how, because they weren't even paintings, just collages... After the award, these were used for my first gallery exhibition in Paris, and there was great interest in them in terms of sales as well. The gallery kept calling me to ask if I had "bluish" or "mid-size" collages. These began to be exhibited at other places, too, and all these developments told me that these works could easily be mass-produced. That was the first time – and I hope the last – I fell into depression and immediately stopped producing... I wasn't in a state to meet those kinds of demands, my mind was somewhere else entirely... For a few months, I wasn't able to do anything...





From the selection of May, 1968, Paris protest photographs by Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist.





From the selection of May, 1968, Paris protest photographs by Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist.





From the selection of May, 1968, Paris protest photographs by Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist.



- How old were you?

29... It was shortly before the events of '68, when a new period began. Museums were being criticized, galleries did not know what to do, and everything was extremely politicized. So I began to look beyond art. We could feel that the world was shaking and changing. It was then that I went in a different direction, looking for a material that carried a potential inside itself.

- What kind of a potential were you looking for?

I always had an issue with war, and at the time, I began thinking about war in terms of resistance. I felt that a material that was ready to explode but kept its energy inside itself could give that to me. I didn't care whether I was making a painting or a sculpture, and I looked for something durable, something alive. That was tar... Tar is a functional material, if you put it on rooftops it protects, but if you put it on fire it gives off the heat inside it, and then you can even stick something on it, because the heat you give it pulls everything inside the tar and sticks everything to its surface as it melts.

- How did you procure it?

Once I gave up collages and began doing this, I no longer went to stores that sold paints but to retailers like La Samaritaine. This is a store where you can find everything from clothes to nails. It has a big branch in Hotel de Ville... That became my material warehouse.



Rouleau en Attente [A Roll Waiting], 1968 - 1969, aluminum covered tar rolls pressed between iron sheet. Photo: Sarkis.
© Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.



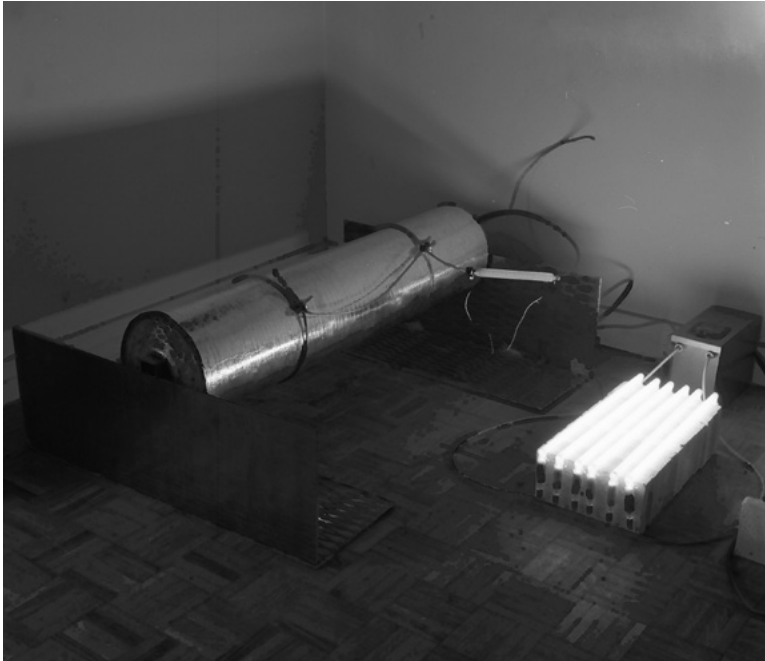
Rouleau en Attente [A Roll Waiting], 1968 - 1969, aluminum covered tar rolls. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

- Aluminum-covered tar rolls were placed inside iron cases; what was the reason you chose iron?



Rouleau en Attente [A Roll Waiting], 1968 - 1969, aluminum covered tar rolls pressed between iron sheet. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

Because I needed materials that would serve me under all conditions, even in war. By that I mean actual war – at the time I did a lot of work on the troubles caused by war. I wanted materials that could put up as good a fight as weapons. I even coined the term “*qualité militaire*” for the materials I sought. I never want to give the upper hand to my opponent, so I use the same material they use. You don’t think of things like that when you live in the living room of a *petit bourgeoisie* house like mine, but if you believe your work will go on a military campaign, then you choose the appropriate material. Iron was a material that was durable and could carry heavy loads... If war breaks out, it will definitely survive, no matter what...



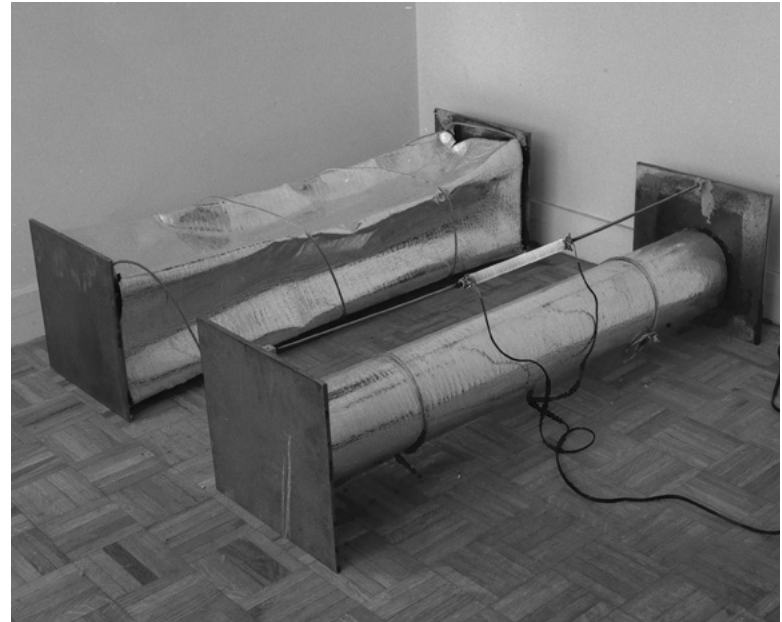
Rouleau en Attente [A Roll Waiting], 1968 - 1969, aluminum covered tar rolls and *Masse Chauffée* [Calescent Mass], 1968 - 1969, fire brick and white neon. Photo: Sarkis.
© Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.



Rouleau en Attente (avec néon blanc) [A Roll Waiting (with white neon)] (1968 - 1969), aluminum covered tar rolls and white neon inside metal crate. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.



Rouleau en Attente [A Roll Waiting], 1968 - 1969, aluminum covered tar rolls. Photo: Sarkis.
© Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.



Rouleau en Attente [A Roll Waiting], 1968 - 1969, aluminum covered tar rolls. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

- ... or it is a material that will bear the weight of all the water put inside it. Just as in *Rouleau en Attente* (avec néon blanc) [A Roll Waiting (with white neon)] (1968-1969) and *Bac en Attente* [A Water Tank Waiting] (1969)...

There is a lamp inside the water and above it a neon... The hot lamp causes water to evaporate, and that vapor turns on the neon above. As the water evaporates, you have to supply more water, which could be 3-5 times a day depending on the temperature of the place.

- This physical relationship creates continuity and gives life to the work.

The way you keep eggs warm so that they will hatch, a warmth like their mother's, but an artificial warmth. It's the same dialectic here. The light above goes on burning as if it feeds the water and will continue doing so for a long time. The concept of time comes into play, and something new takes place! That water comes alive; that tar roll starts to wait in the water and preserves its energy there. The light inside the water feeds it continuously with a very small amount of heat. The material stays as it is, yes, but it is also alive...

- And in order to stay alive it needs to be fed with water again and again.



Rouleau en Attente [A Roll Waiting] and *Conversation* installation view, *When Attitudes Become Form* (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information), Kunsthalle Bern, 1969. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

14 *When Attitudes Become Form* (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information), Kunsthalle Bern, March 22 – April 27, 1969.

Let me show you something you will like. I've got a jar of honey here, sometimes I need it and eat a spoonful [he takes the jar in his hands]. A friend of mine made this honey, and sent

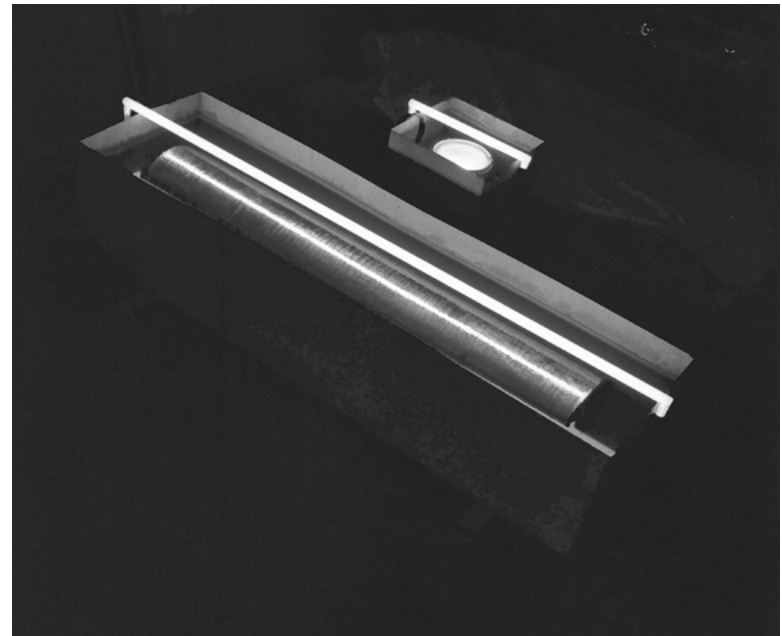
it to me two years ago. It crystallizes with time, and then I put it in warm water, and it turns liquid again. We had never asked these questions in art!

- What meaning does an artwork gain when it is placed inside a ritualistic structure?

What changes does that repetition bring to the work? What kind of a memory does it generate? When you see or hear a work for the second time, what kind of new richness do you focus on even though the work is the same? What kind of richness does the performer add to the work?

- During the exhibition, *Rouleau en Attente (avec néon blanc)* [A Roll Waiting (with white neon)] (1968), with its neon lamp and aluminum-covered tar roll, and *Conversation* (1968), with its electric current submerged in water, were placed at the bottom of the stairs connecting the two floors of the Kunsthalle, right by the last step, where

people coming down would almost tread on them.¹⁴ This choice of place turns the works into threats for the viewers, and also forces the viewer to come face to face with this threat at least twice, because they will have to go down the stairs when they walk through the exhibition, and then up again. How did you decide to put the works there?



Rouleau en Attente (avec néon blanc) [A Roll Waiting (with white neon)] (1968 - 1969), aluminum covered tar rolls and white neon inside metal crate filled with water, and *Conversation* (1968), lamp and white neon inside metal crate filled with water. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

I had never installed my work in a museum or another institution before, I had no experience. When I arrived at the door of the Kunsthalle on the day of the installation, I saw Szeemann leaning against a column, looking out. We said hello and kissed, and when I asked him where I should install the works, he said, "Wherever you like". So I chose the bottom of the stairs, considering the fact that they posed some danger. Of course, as you have said, my aim was to alarm people coming down the stairs in that first instant.

- I can't think of any institution anywhere in the world today that would allow a work like that to be placed at the bottom of stairs. Wasn't security a problem?

Security controls then weren't as strict as they are now, but of course there were certain rules to be obeyed. In one corner you see things burning, and in the other corner there are water and electricity together... Installing the exhibition was no problem, but when people from the fire department came to check one day before the opening, there was a huge problem, naturally; I don't exactly recall how, but things worked out in the end... Personally, I was much more careful

about installing it at home, because my daughter was very young then and wanted to touch everything. I thought that people coming to the museum were adults and they wouldn't touch things. Everyone told me I was building a bomb, but frankly, I didn't think it would pose a threat to anyone's security except for my daughter's.

- Upstairs, next to the wall where the staircase began, Kounellis put some sacks with dried food in them. Richard Artschwager put a sign in the corner where two walls met, which was inspired by the "blp"s – a military sign system showing the speed of a launched rocket. Alain Jacquet laid a cable between two floors with no current passing through it. Together with your cases filled with ready-to-explode water and tar, this part of the exhibition was a group of works thinking about concepts such as war, displacement, survival, and distance.

It was a complete coincidence that these works all used the same space; we hadn't talked beforehand and decided on the places. But the issues we thought about, and the materials we used were similar, and they created common attitudes. None of us was interested in making paintings or sculptures, and we easily put the



works on the floor. And yet, we did all this with utmost respect; between Panamarenko's work and mine there was one meter, and with Weiner's there was a meter and a half.

- On the other hand, Lawrence Weiner opened up an area of one square meter on the wall by scraping off the plasterwork and baring the concrete under it, right around the middle of the staircase. A second square of the same size was opened by Ger van Elk right outside the Kunsthalle.

And what's more, Beuys was there in a small hall, next to Robert Morris's felt works; Claes Oldenburg was with them as well, and who would have thought that the three could share the same space without pushing each other around!

- How were the spots decided?

Everyone decided upon their own spots; neither Szeemann nor the other staff asked us anything... Each work dictated its own place. As for installing the exhibition, we were all in the same position, we were all novices; the only thing we knew was how to keep the work alive, like refilling the case when the water ran out...



Plomb/Eau 2 [Lead/Water 2], 1969. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

- Was everyone invited to install their own work?

Yes, no one could install someone else's. Only Morris was missing, so I installed his piece. Most of the other works had been created right there, and again most of them disappeared afterwards. There weren't many that were made in a studio and transported over. In those days we used to transport the material, not the work itself. After I finished installing my own

work in half an hour and then did Morris's, I helped Beuys because he needed some help placing the felt pieces on top of each other one by one.

- What do you remember about the opening day?

I remember the viewers were quite bad-tempered. Philip Glass gave a concert on the opening day and we were all there. During the concert one person from the audience attacked Glass and attempted to interfere with the piano, but after a fist fight he calmed down and went back to his seat. The concert continued, but then the man attacked Glass again. [Richard] Serra stopped him and they threw the man out. Serra was a close friend of Glass'.

- "Anti-form" is one of the frequently used terms for the works in the exhibition; do you think this term was comprehensive enough to represent all the different attitudes, affinities, and differences?

The term "anti-form" emerged in the US, with the exhibition¹⁵ [Robert] Morris organized at Leo Castelli's warehouse in 1968. Except for [Joseph] Beuys and [Giovanni] Anselmo, everyone in that exhibition was American. I got to

know Beuys in 1968, and Morris in 1967. But Morris met Beuys before all of us, and that must have happened around 1962-1963, when Morris was changing the materials he used. Both used felt, but if you have noticed, their attitude towards felt is as different as night and day. For Beuys, felt is not just any other material; it is protective, it warms, it can be charged; there is an autobiographical element to it. Morris, on the other hand, seems to be saying, "What's so special about felt, look, I cut it - if it were alive it would have screamed". For Morris, felt has only formalist qualities, it is a form. I'm much closer to Beuys on that account.

- Who do you think Americans are closer to?

Americans don't like to talk about this at all, but if you look carefully at Carl Andre's works in which he uses wood, you will see that they are very close to [Aleksandr] Rodchenko's wooden sculptures. [Richard] Serra's black paintings are close to [Kazimir] Malevich. One naturally feels obliged to respond to these works, but you have to do that through your own art. The Germans were very good at that. Italians, too, but between them

¹⁵ 9 At Leo Castelli, Castelli Warehouse, New York, December 4 - 28, 1968.



I find the response of the Germans stronger and more passionate; I don't really like the ethereal quality of the Italians. This is undoubtedly because I love what Beuys gave to the German artists around him.

- And who is Beuys closer to, having to say later on, "I Like America and America Likes Me"?¹⁶

A few years after Beuys staged that performance in 1974, we met in Düsseldorf. He asked me to analyze that work. Here is the analysis I gave him, and I still feel the same way. In 1964, Beuys was going to stage a performance with Morris; Beuys was to be in Berlin, and Morris in New York, on the same day, at the same hour. Beuys was there at the specified day and time, and he remained wrapped in felt for about 24 hours, but for some unknown reason, Morris did not participate in the performance.

- And the performance was left incomplete...

Exactly ten years later, Beuys took the same position in New York, and was taken from the airport to the gallery in an ambulance amid blaring sirens, wrapped in felt. He took the rhythm of

that incomplete dual performance and continued it. In my opinion, what took Beuys to the States was that desire to finish the incomplete work, to stitch together the two parts.

- In the meantime, in the background of that desire was Germany, trying to rebuild itself by repairing the heavy damage created by World War II and to confront its own history, don't you think?

Towards the end of [Rainer Werner] Fassbinder's film *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* [The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum] (1975), there's a scene where the gas is left on in the house and there's a big explosion. The radio announces that even though Hungary was seen as the front-runner of the World Cup in 1954, West Germany won. That explosion is like the metaphor of the explosion of German economy in the 1950s; it takes place after a war whose history was hidden from the youth for a long time. Writers like Heinrich Böll began for the first time to rip that history apart through their "Literature of Destruction." In those years, Beuys created works by using certain objects laden

¹⁶ *I Like America and America Likes Me*, René Block Gallery, New York, May 1974.



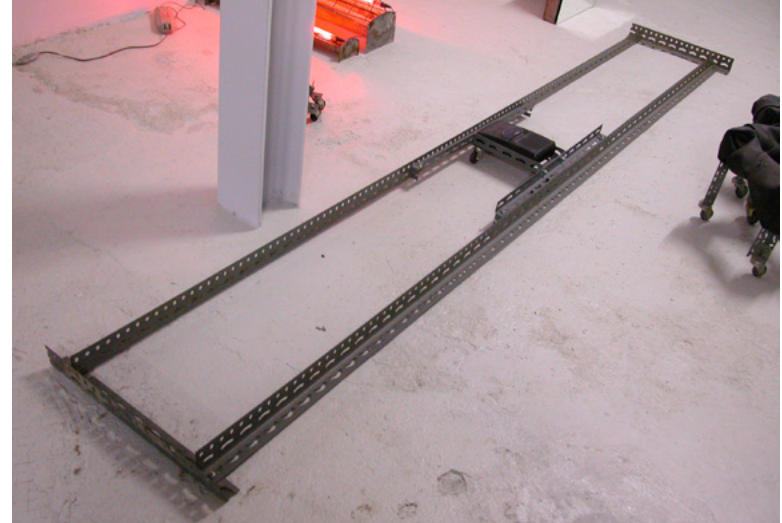


Rouleau en Attente [A Roll Waiting], 1969, tar roll covered with aluminum. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

with symbolic meaning, with no formalist aspect whatsoever. He had this attitude of digging up the hidden history of his country, and Beuys is unthinkable without World War II.

- A Beuys who was the creator of myths, taking it unto himself to remind his society of the common values they shared...

The greyness and colorlessness of his works reflect the pain of a country that had carried out a holocaust. This idea of bearing the burden of



Le Rail [Rail], 1970, iron structure. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

pain is a very Christian concept; Jesus Christ carries the sins and pain of all humankind, and Beuys' works have the same feeling. A couple of years after he started teaching at the Academy of Arts in Düsseldorf in 1961, some artists fleeing from East Germany gathered there, and an important attitude began to emerge. [Gerhard] Richter, [Blinky] Palermo, and [Anselm] Kiefer were all there. They were attached to their own history, but they were also able to keep a certain distance. In addition, they were opposed to the formalism of American art and Pop aesthetics



Pour les Oiseaux [For the Birds], 1969, red neon on iron structure. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.



of [Andy] Warhol and [Roy] Lichtenstein, which we called "cold painting." Against the mechanical aesthetics of the latter, which hid the human touch, the former began to create "warm painting." The question they indirectly asked was, "You believe that the machine creates something perfect, but when you enlarge the scale, is it really perfect?". [Sigmar] Polke's paintings are all about that question of larger scale... Recently I have been thinking a lot about those days. Celibidache was the conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic during the years 1945-1953, along with Wilhelm Furtwängler. A book has been published recently on the rift between them, which I bought and read – I have always been interested in finding out the artistic outcomes of such rifts. I'm studying Celibidache's conducting style, along with his political stance at the time and his body movements while conducting.

- Because body movements have a politics, too?

Yes and in those movements you try to come closer to something, you try to look like something, but you also try to move away from something...

¹⁷ *When Attitudes Become Form (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information)*, Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, May 9 – June 15, 1969.

- The heat emanating from the heated tar rolls enabled us to approach or move away from them.

They had a 1,000 watt resistor on them. The 1,000 watts heated the one-meter long roll as well as the museum at Krefeld.¹⁷ As you came closer to the work, you could feel the attraction of the heat. Yes, the heat created a relationship between the work and the audience. It is true, though, that minimalist objects are not very different in that sense; they find their place in the venue without making us forget our existence. They always remain in touch with the space and with us.

- What other attitudes in other parts of Europe caught your attention at the time?

Italy was the place where the gallery-artist-historian network functioned the best. The young art historian [Germano] Celant and the young gallery owner [Gian Enzo] Sperone were together with the young artists in Torino. They were all about the same age, only Mario Merz was quite a bit older than they were. They formed a group; they adhered to a clear political line, but they also created some very independent works.



- What was the common political attitude that joined them?

They were against American capitalism; those who have created the Arte Povera movement of today built their attitude by constantly engaging with the literature and film of their own country and by forming intellectual ties. They had strong ties with [Pier Paolo] Pasolini as well as the New Realist cinema, which began around 1944. Later on, some of the Arte Povera artists created baroque works, and if you study them closely, you will see that they have an ethereal quality they share with [Federico] Fellini.

- If we look for symmetry between the populist tendency at the core of the New Realist cinema and its antagonistic approach to Hollywood, and the antagonism of the Arte Povera artists against American capitalism, as you have mentioned, what is the movement they oppose the most?

The Pop field in the States. Many historians claim that Minimalists came after the Pop artists, but in fact, they were influential in the same period. I can demonstrate that with the parallels



Sculpture Flottante avec la Résistance [Floating Sculpture with Resistor], 1968 - 1969, resistor inside metal basin. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

between the works of Morris and [Jasper] Johns. As we have said, in Morris's work dating from 1962 - 1963, when he hadn't yet begun his geometrical forms, you can see a change in material that is the result of Beuys' influence. That change is a slightly different expression of the change of material that you see in Johns. The reason



Sculpture Flottante avec la Résistance [Floating Sculpture with Resistor], 1968 - 1969, resistor inside metal basin. Photo: Sarkis.

© Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.



Pop artists are thought to have come before is their control of the market, which enabled the Americans to use that art like a weapon. When [Robert] Rauschenberg was selected for the Venice Biennial at the end of 1964, there was no Ministry of Culture. Those works of Rauschenberg were brought to Europe in ships belonging to the American Navy, and when people found out about that, an anti-American sentiment began to emerge.

- So that opposition had an economic aspect as well?

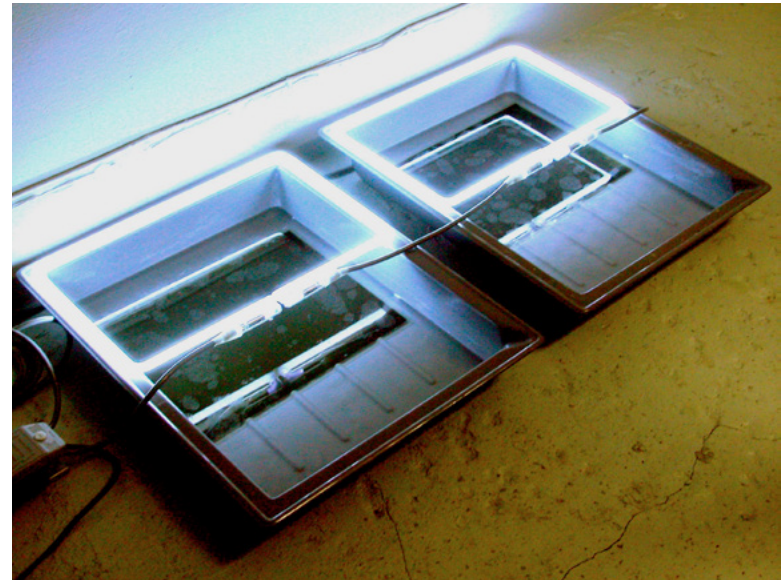
On the one hand there was an imperialistic movement similar to the Marshall Plan and an American art movement that was trying to conquer the European market, while on the other hand there were the Europeans who tried to stand up against it and establish their own art. This was war.

- And a communications and economy network was fast developing around these movements.

Yes, but artists were always at the center of that network, and they were always the leaders. At the time, they were only interested in creating

their work, they weren't even close to the idea of transforming the work into a commodity.

- It's normal for the gallery to try to create a market using the work created (which also makes it possible for the work to have a record as it circulates and thus have some sort of permanence), and it's not difficult to see that the artist will have great difficulty in thinking about the sale of the



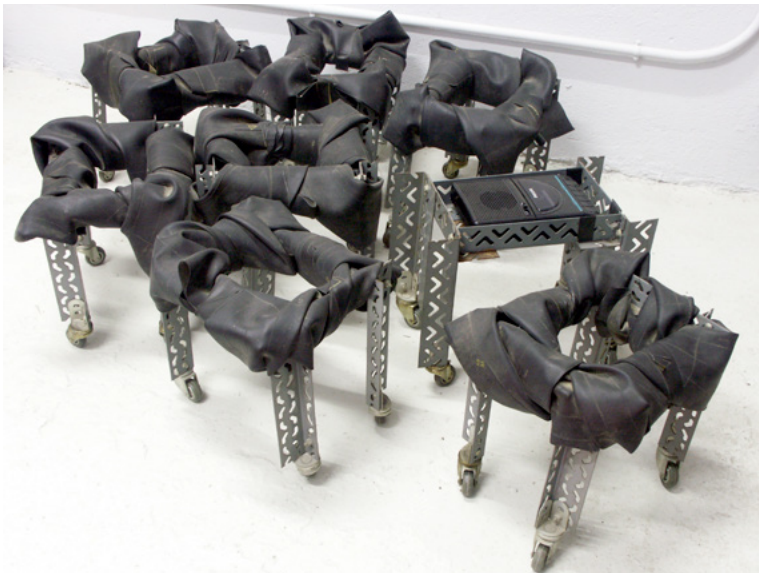
Les 2 Bacs [2 Water Tanks], 1968, film negatives of photographs from May 1968, Paris and white neon inside a plastic basin filled with water. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.



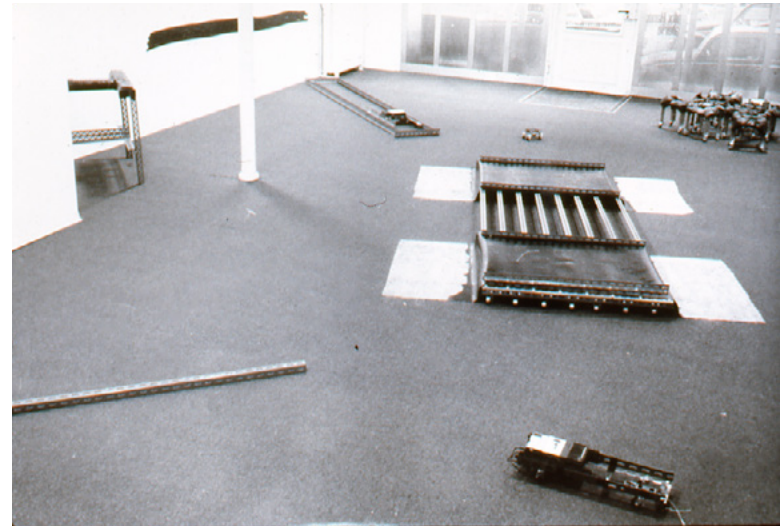
Les 3 Bacs [3 Water Tanks], 1968, film negatives of photographs from May 1968, Paris and white neon inside a plastic basin filled with water. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

work they are still in the process of creating. And if we also consider the search for new forms and content just so that the created work will not be permanent, the contradiction grows bigger.

Art always comes from the artist. But the gallery has to build an area of sale, no matter what. There are adventurous galleries, very few in number, and Sperone is a good example. Then there are also galleries that twist things



7 Roulettes [7 Rollers], 1971, iron sheet structures with rollers wrapped with bands and cassette player. Photo: Sarkis.
© Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.



SARKIS installation view, Galerie Handschin, Basel, 1971.
© Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

out of shape, like those selling the photographs of the works of Body Artists. Those photographs are not works of art. Some artists agreed to do that, but some, like [Vito] Acconci, for example, who is an amazing artist, never did. I have always tried to think about the work and its exploitation together. My solution is not to turn it into a commodity, which happens if you continue creating similar works after the one you have sold; that leads to an expanding market, but I can't stand doing that. Look, there was a gallery owner in Rome called Gian Tommaso



BLACK OUT I installation view, Galerie Handschin, Basel, 1974. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.



Liverani, who asked for an exhibition fee from the institutions wanting to show works of his artists. His gallery was called La Salita; that's where Richard Serra had an exhibition with live animals. Kounellis and [Giulio] Paolini also had their first solo exhibitions there. I learned the idea of asking for a fee in return for an in situ work from him, and practiced it from the early 1970s onwards. Just like actors getting paid for each performance, we too should take into account the fact that our work is live and for the most part it is not sold.

- Speaking of selling – what happened to *Conversation* and the pieces of the *Rouleau en Attente* [A Roll Waiting] series after the Bern and Krefeld exhibitions?

Szeemann called one day to tell me there was someone who preferred to remain anonymous and wanted to purchase the tar roll work, but that he didn't want to give it to the exhibition at Krefeld, and that if I were to sell it, Kunsthalle would receive a 15% commission. I multiplied my rent by three, made a list of things I needed, and that was the price I gave Szeemann – I don't remember now how much it was. The price was

accepted and the works were sold. That's how I found out about the Krefeld exhibition; I had no idea my works were going to be taken there... I made four new works for that exhibition, and again went in person to install them; at the time, I was making money installing exhibitions and Szeemann had especially called me there because he wanted me to install some works other than my own. While I was there, the director of the Museum told me they wanted to buy one of my works for the Museum. I gave him my price, which he found very reasonable and decided to buy one more.

- What was the price?

I had asked for 3,200 Francs for the two of them, which is 500 Euros today, but at the time that was a lot of money. He wrote me a check, and advised me to cash it as soon as possible, because he had heard that the Franc was about to be devalued. So I went to the bank straight away and exchanged it, and bought him a nice bottle of cognac as a present. Years later, recently in fact, I came across a catalog... The heirs of the collector who had bought the works and given them to the museum had sold them again, and they ended up

SARKIS AND "WHEN ATTITUDES BECOME FORM"



From the selection of May 1968, Paris protest photographs by Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist.



in the Zwirner & Wirth collection, where they are today.

- Did you never hear from the person who bought the works at Bern?

Two years later, I had my first exhibition¹⁸ at his gallery in Basel, and the second one¹⁹ in 1974. That second time around, I made one of my favorite works – *Blackout* (1974).

- In *Blackout*, a part of the gallery floor covered with tar was set on fire and that burnt part emerged as a pitch black area. A copy of that same area was reproduced on the wall right above it.

It was the time of the Cyprus War... The radio kept announcing forbidden altitudes and latitudes for ships. I recorded these, marked them on the map, and the result was that shape. I put it on the floor and marked its contours, and then set it on fire, so that the black of the tar emerged. *Blackout* was word play: taken literally, it means the emergence of black. *Blackout*

¹⁸ SARKIS, Galerie Handschin, Basel, September 1 – October 30, 1971.

¹⁹ *BLACKOUT I*, Galerie Handschin, Basel, September 30 – November 30, 1974.

is also a military term, used for turning lights off during war; a momentary loss of consciousness is also called a “blackout”; and finally, blackout in photography is the totally dark diaphragm with no hole for the light to pass through. Strangely enough, no one stepped inside this shape during the exhibition, except for a dog! People who saw it sensed that something had passed through that area...

- And the fact that this was in a gallery reminds me of the ad placed in a magazine by Sperone, saying “In spite of everything, art is still a real mysterious comforting hard dream”.²⁰ The fact that the magazine in question was *Avalanche*, and that its founders were members of the group²¹ that organized against MoMA in January 1969, explains to me how the rights you had at that time as artists were won through a joint struggle against the system at various locations throughout Europe and the States.

²⁰ “In spite of everything art is still a real mysterious comforting hard dream”, Galleria Sperone, Torino advertisement, *Avalanche*, Summer 1972.

²¹ A group of art workers organized in January 1969 around Takis against MoMA in New York City. Some of the documents concerning Takis’ protest against MoMA and the Art Workers Coalition eventually triggered by this action are available on the Primary Information website: <http://primaryinformation.org/index.php?/projects/art-workers-coalition/>



All those joint attitudes were being developed in order to shake up the stinking system that never changed. But you have to see that even though this matter of attitudes and the winning of rights started then, it lasted for years. I started teaching at the School of Decorative Arts in Strasbourg in 1980, and my job was to prepare 4th and 5th graders for the national diploma. In my first year, I took the students to the 5th grade national diploma jury. There were five people on the jury, and all were men! Right after that, on my own, as if representing the school, I went to the Ministry of Education and told them that I wasn't going to let my students take the exam next year if there weren't at least two women on the jury. I also added that I was prepared to start a national campaign depending on their response. And the next year there were two women on the jury; this is now the norm in France.

- Do you agree that the art system is an extension of the established structures of society and that a change intended for the system has to be triggered within that social structure?

Yes, exactly, and only if this is the struggle of a totally political attitude can change occur.



Rouleau en Attente [A Roll Waiting], 1968 - 1969, aluminum covered tar rolls, 1000 watt resistor. Photo: Sarkis.

© Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

SARKIS AND "WHEN ATTITUDES BECOME FORM"



View from Sarkis' Paris
studio/house, 1968.
Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of
the artist and ADAGP, 2013.



For example, I had to do other things to win certain other rights at the School in Strasbourg. It was a century-old art school and extremely conservative. There were workshops for fabrics, prints, accessories, etc., but not a single workshop where students could think and talk about art; what's more, once a student was enrolled in one of these workshops, they were unable to transfer to another for five years. It was like boot camp... 25 students revolted, demanding to use more than one workshop and to have greater freedom for their work, and two instructors asked me to see these students.



Untitled, 1968 - 1969, clay on wood sheet and film negatives of photographs from May 1968 (detail). Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.



Untitled, 1968 - 1969, clay on wood sheet and film negatives of photographs from May 1968. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

I had given lectures at various schools in '68, but I had absolutely no teaching experience. I accepted seeing the students on one condition – that the School would have to assign us a space for our use only, I would go in with my works, and ask the students to come with theirs. We would stay in there for four days and no one would bother us, and I would give my decision at the end of those four days. That's what we did, and at the

end of the four days I agreed to open a studio, because those four days were terrific! I founded a studio called Art Department, I had 2-3 rooms, all of them were open door, and everyone was free to work with whatever material they liked. I kept it going for ten years.

- Giving young people the freedom of choice entails shaping current conditions to accommodate that freedom.

Art can be instructive and an artist is someone who teaches not only a production technique but also a behavior. This is a political matter. The police raided Düsseldorf Academy because Beuys let 200 people into a studio intended for 20. Beuys registered immigrants who needed to stay in Germany as students at his studio, thereby enabling them to have official papers. He used to say, "They need to be there at that moment, and we must not ask why they have come, but help them meet their urgent needs". Attitudes like that resulted in rights being gained.

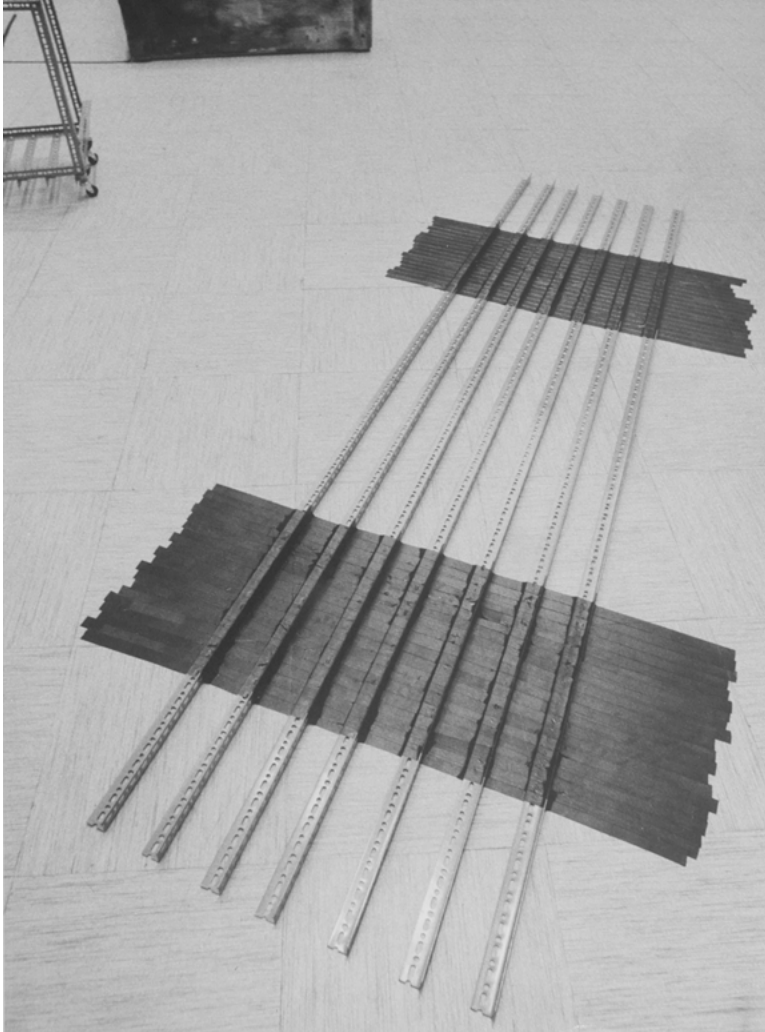
- How did Szeemann find out about your works?

Actually, even today, I don't know how he found about me. But he always asked around – the night I met him, he asked me about some names to figure out which artists I knew... Our profession was just being born at the time, but so was his.

- When was this?

One midnight in the Fall of 1968... One day he came with [Pierre] Gaudibert to visit me at home. I hadn't known him before that, but I knew Gaudibert – he was the terrific director of Musée d'Art Moderne. He was a very politicized man. He took part in the '68 incidents, and then in 1972 they somehow fired him. The room we sat in at home was no bigger than you see in the photographs; there was a table by the window where we ate and where I worked, while my wife worked on her translations. There was a single armchair, a couple of chairs, a TV set, and a bookcase. And a kid running around. At the time, I was working on the iron cases filled with water and the stuff made of clay into which I had placed the photographic films of the '68 incidents; when I brought them all out, three-quarters of the room was occupied.





SARKIS installation view, ARC / Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville, Paris, 1970. Photo: Ugo Mulas. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

So we had been waiting for them to come, in that state, since four o'clock. They came late in the night; I looked out the window and saw the taxi that was waiting for them. They came up, and I told them I was showing nothing if they did not send the taxi away. All my works were already there, but I was pissed! Gaudibert went down and sent the taxi away, while Szeemann was examining the works. When Gaudibert came back Szeemann said, "These are not for you, they are for me".

- What did that mean?

Gaudibert was contemplating opening an exhibition similar to Szeemann's, and perhaps the two of them were going to do it together. Later on Gaudibert gave up for some reason, possibly because France wasn't yet ready for works like that. Szeemann started telling me about it, but the exhibition had no name or even a formed content. "I have a number of things I still don't know how to combine," he said, "but that's what attracts me." They kept talking about "concept," and that's when I first heard the word. After that night, I didn't hear from him for a month or two. At the time, I had a Chinese imitation Rolleiflex

6x6 camera, and I took photographs of some of my works and sent them to Bern, which was pretty difficult, because sending something from one place to another wasn't easy back then, it was expensive, too, and so was getting your photographs printed. I used to count every penny... Then one day the phone rang, and I was told that someone would come to pick up two of my works.

- Did *Attitudes* help you in any way in Paris?

When *Attitudes* was a success, Gaudibert came to see me and asked me if I could organize a small exhibition in the same style at the Museum. I accepted immediately, because I already knew the people I would ask to give me their works – Arte Povera people, Beuys, [Christian] Boltanski, and [Vito] Acconci. When it became clear that the budget was insufficient to get these, I told him there were a couple of collectors I knew who could buy these works. Gaudibert did not want to get involved with that part of the job, so he decided in the end to let me have my own exhibition. But I preferred to have a two-artist exhibition with Boltanski; I could read his works thanks to the language I had learned from Beuys. We opened the exhibition²² in September 1970,

but in retrospect, I think that exhibition was only possible as the result of an accident; Paris wasn't yet hungry or ready for it.

²² BOLTANSKI/SARKIS, ARC / Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville, Paris, 1970.

²³ *Prospect*, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1968-1976.

- Did you come across similar tendencies in other cities as well?

A month before Szeemann's visit, there had been a group exhibition at Düsseldorf Kunsthalle, the first part of an annual exhibition system.²³ That was very different from what had been done up to that time.

- What was the difference?

There was nothing ornate, everything was on the floor, and it was an international group exhibition; the Arte Povera artists from Italy were side by side with Beuys and Panamarenko from Belgium. That was where I met Beuys for the first time, and I felt bad about not being in that exhibition... I had gone there as Ileana Sonnabend's guest.

- What was Sonnabend's role in the exhibition?



She was showing some artists from her gallery. Sonnabend was actually a Pop Art gallery, with the mission of introducing that art into Europe. She picked up other movements as well, so as not to be left behind, but her heart wasn't in it, she could never be a Konrad Fischer, who had a really radical approach.

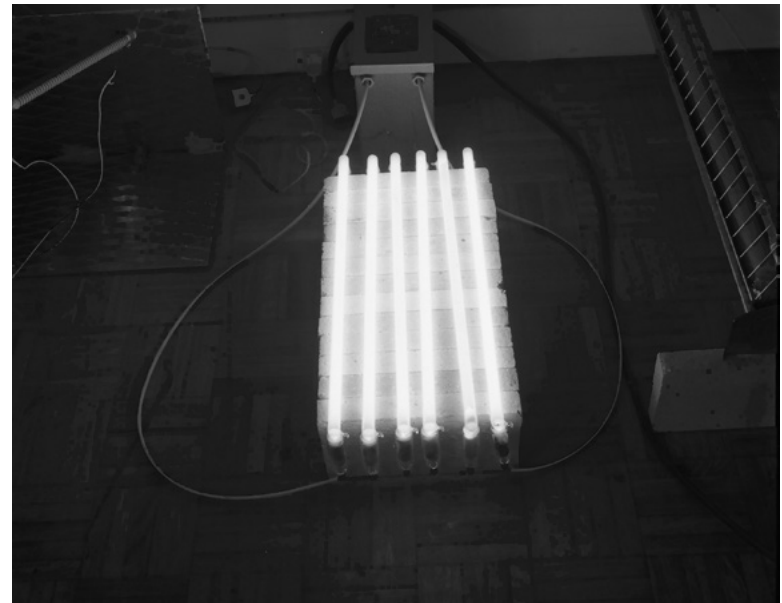
- It was Fischer who brought the exhibition together, wasn't it?

The exhibition was born out of the dialogue between Fischer and Jürgen Harten, the director of the Kunsthalle. Everybody wanted to be a part of that newly emerging energy at the time. Roles and norms hadn't been fixed yet; curatorship as we know it today was only just being discovered. I came to realize that certain codes were solidifying around us at that time, when Szeemann came to visit... The Autumn of 1968 was on full boil then, we were holding something fiery in our hands!

- And if I'm not mistaken, what lit that fire was the desire to completely change the world, the active role given to art in that process of change, the honest relationship one had with the work,

the attitude that emerged during that relationship, and the meaning this attitude imparted to the work. At the point art is today, we realize that this was a serious turning point for that time. How much do you think Szeemann was aware of that?

The interesting thing about Szeemann, if you ask me, was that he had sensed certain codes before there was anything out in the open, at a time when these codes were only just forming and



Masse Chauffée [Calescent Mass], 1968 - 1969, fire brick and neon. Photo: Sarkis. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.

24 *Op Losse Schroeven: Situaties en Cryptostructuren*
[*Op Losse Schroeven: Situations and Cryptostructures*],
Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam, March 15 –
April 27, 1969.

they did not look like anything that had gone before; he sensed these and attempted to bring them together.

- Were you surprised when he wanted to set the Kunsthalle on fire?

was like there. It has always stayed fresh in my memory...

We didn't have any prior experience to compare it to, we had no history on our backs! I went to the exhibition at Stedelijk Museum²⁴ as a visitor, because Piero Gilardi was my friend and had worked a lot for that exhibition. As an institution, it was much more important than Kunsthalle Bern, because it held a very important collection. But it never became an exhibition that artists installed, it remained a museum.

- Which one was more beautiful in your opinion?

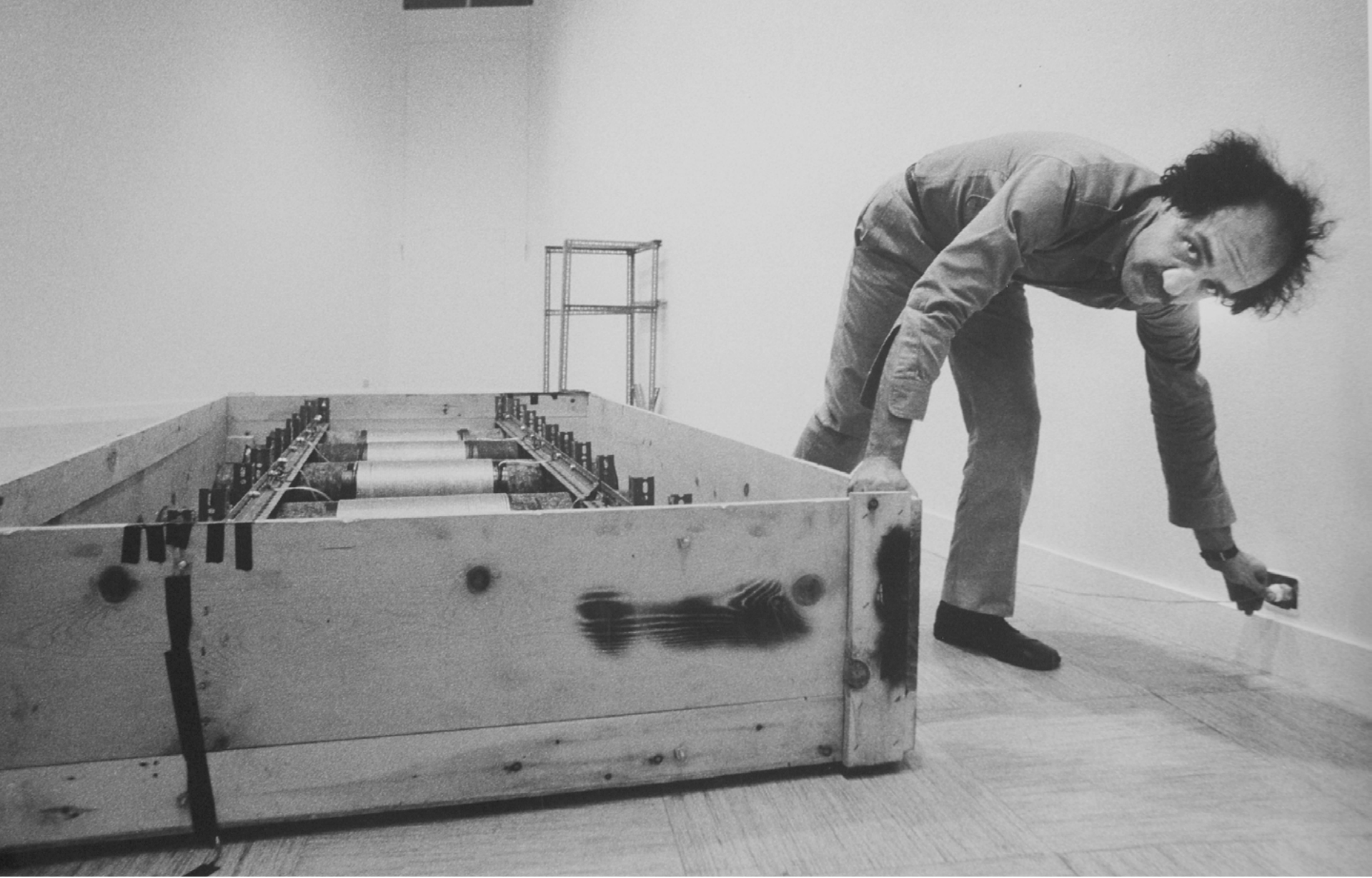
The one at Bern was wild! All contributions were passionate... You know how people always talk about first date, first thrill, first love – you are in no position to make calculations, because you aren't set in your ways yet. That was what it





Sarkis, installation view, ARC / Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville, Paris, 1970. Photo: Ugo Mulas. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.





Sarkis, installation view, ARC / Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville, Paris, 1970. Photo: Ugo Mulas. © Courtesy of the artist and ADAGP, 2013.



SARKIS AND "WHEN ATTITUDES BECOME FORM"

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GO TO SARKIS FOR BEING A SOURCE OF ENDLESS INSPIRATION
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—NAZLI GÜRLEK



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